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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER ENGLISH INSTRUCTION.

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TO STUDY THE ENGLISH PROGRAMS AT FIVE MICHIGAN JUNIOR COLLEGES, THE RESEARCHER SPENT A WEEK AT EACH COLLEGE, INTERVIEWING, VISITING CLASSES, AND STUDYING WRITTEN MATERIALS. FIVE CONCLUSIONS RESULTED--(1) REMEDIAL COURSES ARE OF DOUBTFUL SUCCESS. THERE IS WIDESPREAD DISSATISFACTION WITH PLACEMENT TESTS, TEACHING METHODS, AND THE COURSE SEQUENCE. (2) UNIVERSITY PARALLEL FRESHMEN COURSES ARE WELL PLANNED AND COMPETENTLY TAUGHT. (3) A FRESHMAN ENGLISH COURSE FOR TERMINAL STUDENTS IS NEEDED. (4) FORMAL GRAMMAR STUDY IS NOT A SATISFACTORY MEANS OF REMEDIATION. (5) LITERATURE COURSES ARE TAUGHT COMPETENTLY AND ENTHUSIASTICALLY. (6) TEACHER PREPARATION IS NOT ADEQUATE FOR THE JUNIOR COLLEGE SITUATION. (7) TEACHERS APPRECIATE THE NEED FOR REMEDIAL PROGRAMS. (8) RESEARCH IN ENGLISH PROGRAMS IS INADEQUATE. IN ADDITION TO RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING LITERATURE, TRANSFER COURSES, AND TEACHER PREPARATION, IT IS SUGGESTED THAT (1) REALISTIC GOALS BE SET FOR REMEDIAL PROGRAMS, (2) REMEDIAL READING PRECEDE WRITING INSTRUCTION, (3) REMEDIAL COURSES NOT BE REPEATED, (4) REMEDIAL PROGRAMS BE AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE CURRICULUM, (5) A SEPARATE, NONTRANSFER, TERMINAL ENGLISH COURSE BE ORGANIZED IN A 2-SEMESTER SEQUENCE, (6) TERMINAL STUDENTS TAKE THE COURSE BEST SUITED TO THEIR ABILITIES, AND (7) THAT RESEARCH BE UNDERTAKEN ON STUDENTS AND TEACHING OF ENGLISH. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN "JUNIOR COLLEGE JOURNAL," VOLUME 38, NUMBER 5, FEBRUARY 1968. (WO)

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By John Weber

Recommendations for Better English Instruction

A Study of Five English Programs In Michigan Produces Some Stimulating Recommendations

"Remedial English programs which concentrate on the teaching of grammar are usually unsuccessful."

"There is little evidence of institutional or departmental research efforts, either exerted or accomplished, in community colleges."

These are two of the eight conclusions of a research study launched in early 1966 in which the writer endeavored to collect information about the English programs in five Michigan community colleges. A week was spent at each college interviewing teachers and administrators, both formally and informally, sitting in on classes, and studying catalogs and dittoed materials.

Conclusions

Although the nature of this study precluded setting up hypotheses to test, the writer believes that the data gathered from interviews and general observations warrant eight conclusions.

1. *Teachers and department chairmen alike were skeptical about the degree of success achieved by their remedial programs.* The vast majority of teachers interviewed stated their belief that a low percentage of students (25 per cent was a common estimate) entered the university-parallel course, and that an even smaller percentage completed it. Every department chairman reported dissatisfactions with the accuracy of placement tests, teaching methods, the sequence of the remedial course, or all four.

2. *The belief that deficiencies in English can be remedied by the teaching of grammar was not held by most of the teachers.* Both the checklists used and classroom observations confirmed that traditional, formal grammar is, in general, little used. Indeed, many teachers mentioned that remedial students seem to have an "emotional block" against formal grammar, and that it seems to have little carry-over into student writing.

3. *The university-parallel freshman English courses appeared to be well planned and competently taught.* Nearly all the teachers whose teaching the writer was able to observe were competent and stimulating in their classrooms. Furthermore, in a number of ways, most teachers revealed genuine concern for their students and a dedication to teaching English well.

The writer does believe, however, that too much time is spent on the study of literature at the expense of teaching writing, and that some teachers spend too much class time on minor matters of mechanics which should have been learned in high school and which a transfer student certainly ought to learn on his own if he doesn't already know them.

4. *Community colleges should offer a freshman English course designed for terminal students.* The majority of teachers interviewed stated they believed that most terminal students cannot do satisfactory work in the university-parallel course. Enrolled in that course nevertheless, terminal students struggle with material which is often beyond their ability to learn. The university-parallel course is thus harder to teach well; the terminal students often become discouraged, frustrated, or both; and they often receive failing or D grades. It is hard

JC 680 111

to see the benefit to anyone. Furthermore, one might question the usefulness of the content of the university-parallel freshman English course to the terminal student. Finally, the success of the freshman English course for terminal students offered in one of the colleges indicates that such a course can be valuable to the student and respected by the faculty.

5. *All data indicated that literature courses were competently and enthusiastically taught.* The facts that teachers are given much freedom in planning the literature courses they teach, that the teachers' educational backgrounds in literature are usually strong, and that literature is generally more enjoyable to teach than expository writing—these facts all contribute to the well-planned and well-taught literature courses at the colleges included in this study. The practice of assigning one literature course a semester to each instructor, with senior members of the faculty given preference, seems to be a satisfactory way of insuring that nearly all instructors teach some literature each year.

6. *Many teachers were in their undergraduate and graduate work not adequately prepared in three areas most likely to be useful in teaching English in the community college: linguistics, expository writing, and a broad view of American or British literature.* Linguistics may someday provide new methods and materials which will be extremely effective in teaching writing, especially to low-ability students. Yet since linguistics is an area in which most community college English teachers have had no training, they are reluctant—or simply do not have the time—to work knowledgeably with linguistically oriented materials, much less keep abreast of recent developments in linguistics. As far as writing is concerned, few teachers had had any training in expository writing beyond their own freshman English courses. And although all teachers' literary training was extensive, it tended to develop a narrow specialty.

7. *Most English teachers regarded the task of teaching low-ability students to be an important and integral part of the community college program.* Few English teachers expressed a desire to eliminate the remedial program, even if they were not satisfied with it. Similarly, few expressed a negative feeling toward either the occupational or adult education programs. This situation is in happy contrast to that reported by Medsker.[1] Nevertheless, some teachers, usually new on the staffs, did express dismay at having to teach students with low academic abilities.

8. *In the five community colleges included in this study, there is a dearth of research done on the English programs or on their students.* Although small research projects by individual faculty members were not unusual, wider departmental research was. No reliable data were available, for instance, which would reveal the extent that student writing improved during the university-parallel course. Neither were data available which would show how many students from a remedial program successfully completed the university-parallel course; nor indeed, how many remedial students enrolled in the university-parallel course. Perhaps most important, few studies existed which would tell the teacher much about the characteristics of students enrolled in the college; and when such studies did exist, they did not appear to have been used in planning the English curriculum. In general, no English department included in this study had done any research which would give supportable answers to "How good a job are we doing?" or "How well are we meeting the needs of our students?"

Recommendations

The remedial program: Without question, the remedial program is the weakest part of community college English programs. Teaching remedial English at the college level presents complex problems. Suitable materials are scarce; interested and sympathetic teachers are hard to find; students tend to be lacking in cultural background and academic ability and to have many personal and emotional problems; results are slow in coming and difficult to measure. Clearly, there is much to be done. With respect to remedial English, the writer makes four recommendations:

1. That realistic goals be set for remedial programs. Goals need to be reasonably consistent with what can generally be accomplished. Community college English teachers who have taught remedial sections know that improvement in students' writing comes slowly, if at all. Just what can be done with a student whose verbal skills are low is an open question. English departments should answer it as best they can, and from the answer set up goals that are realistic and generally attainable. The department should then make these goals known. Undoubtedly they will not appear to be goals for a college-level course. "To write a mechanically perfect sentence" or "to write a reasonably fault-free paragraph," for example, do not sound like high enough goals for a semester's, or two semesters' work. But people may as well know that about forty-five hours a semester in a classroom is not enough to break bad writing habits of years' standing and replace them with new ones, to improve reading skills significantly, to inspire some original thoughts on difficult subjects, and to teach remedial students to write an acceptable essay. Perhaps even twice as much time would not be enough.

2. That the remedial English program consist of training in reading improvement followed by training in writing improvement. The reading specialist at one college said that the average reading ability of freshmen entering that institution was between ninth and tenth grade level and that the range was from seventh grade level to above fourteenth grade level. Similar information did not exist at the other four colleges, but teachers' remarks indicated that remedial students—indeed, often students in university-parallel programs—have difficulty in reading college-level materials. Since reading is such an important factor for success in English, not to mention in other work and perhaps in life after college, it seems that reading improvement should be an integral part of remedial English and should precede any other remedial work. To accomplish this, a reading laboratory, supervised if possible by a qualified reading improvement specialist, should be established in each community college.

Once a student's reading ability has been improved (hopefully, to a college level), then it is reasonable to assume that training in writing can profitably begin. One English department has found that a stiff, one-semester remedial course which emphasizes expository writing produces better results than a less rigorous course covering two semesters. Despite the argument that pressure is the last thing a remedial student needs, probably the pressure of having to complete the work in one semester would actually aid most students, especially if that pressure were combined with instruction by a sympathetic and helpful teacher and preceded, if needed, by work in reading improvement.

3. That students generally not be allowed to repeat a remedial course. If the goals of the remedial course are realistic, then a student who cannot reach them within a reasonable time should not ordinarily be permitted to repeat the work. A policy which allows him to try again and again is not good for the student generally (it deludes him), or for the college (it is poor public relations).

4. That remedial work continue to be regarded as an integral and important part of the community college's program. Even if one assumes that little can be done with the remedial English student, there would still remain the exceptions—the "late bloomer," the student who has ability but lacks confidence, the former delinquent who has seen the value of an education, and others—the exceptions who, were it not for a community college remedial program, would find the door to higher education closed to them forever. Even though few do go through this door, the door must remain open. In cities blighted with slums and plagued with educational deficiencies, it is especially important that ways for people to improve themselves be available. That the overwhelming majority of community college English teachers with whom the writer spoke feel the same way is, he believes, a credit to their professionalism, optimism, and humanitarianism.

English for terminal students: In the area of English for terminal students, the writer makes the following four recommendations:

1. That community colleges offer a separate English course for terminal students. To this writer, separating freshman English in a community college into "terminal" and "transfer" English is neither proliferation nor dilution of English; it is recognizing that not all the broad spectrum which is "English" is appropriate or possible for all students. That the content of the university-parallel course might do the terminal student good is not at issue nor the important question: it is rather a question of priorities.

2. That the terminal English course be a two-semester sequence which concentrates primarily on literature and the "popular arts" and secondarily on writing related to students' job requirements. The terminal English course should be one that emphasizes good quality literature of the types which people of average or below-average reading abilities are likely to enjoy, e.g., good quality science fiction, "best sellers," and mysteries. Novels and short stories should be studied, and possibly drama, but, unless in the hands of an unusual teacher, probably not poetry. Terminal students should be encouraged to read—a habit they have probably neither developed nor are likely to develop without training and encouragement. Similarly, "popular arts," such as the cinema and television, should be included in such a course. The student might thus learn to be more discriminating in what he watches.

Writing should receive secondary emphasis. Students who enter jobs after two years' training in a community college are not likely to be required to write much on their own, except for reports. Therefore, report writing might well be taught in the course, emphasizing especially such essential elements as accuracy, brevity, the following of directions, and neatness. Like the university-parallel course it should be discipline oriented, not vocationally oriented.

3. That this course not be transferable to four-year colleges and universities. The student should understand that the terminal English course is not intended to meet the requirements of four-year institutions. There should be no pressure to make the course "transferable."

4. That terminal students who have the ability be allowed to fulfill their English requirements by

taking the regular transfer English course, should they desire. Not all terminal students lack the ability to succeed in the university-parallel course. If a high-ability student remains on a two-year program, he will have benefitted more from the university-parallel course than the lower ability student could have; and if he changes his mind, as some do, and goes on to a four-year institution, he would be able to transfer more credits.

English for transfer students: The writer found that the university parallel courses in all five colleges included in this study were well organized, intellectually stimulating, and for the most part, competently taught. He has but two recommendations to make:

1. That the teaching of imaginative literature not be given an important role in the freshman university-parallel course. If the primary purpose of the university-parallel course is to teach expository and argumentative writing, then the entire course should be directed toward that end. This does not mean that imaginative literature should not be read for content and ideas, only that it should not be studied as literature. Matters of structure, form, and style should be taught in a literature course.

2. That the teachers of the university-parallel course concentrate on instilling attitudes of intellectual honesty, respect for the proper use of written material, questioning, and searching rather than worrying about paralleling a particular university's freshman English course. The writer believes that if a student is taught attitudes, then the skills necessary to achieve those attitudes will be forthcoming. Intellectual curiosity and honesty certainly are more important to success in a four-year college or university than whether or not students have read particular essays or have done a specified amount of writing. Attitudes and skills can be taught by a variety of methods and with dissimilar materials, and if a community college can show that it is trying to teach in its university-parallel course attitudes and skills the four-year institution desires, then the four-year institution should not be concerned about the specific materials covered in the course.

Literature courses: Many teachers and all department chairmen expressed the desire that the demand for literature courses be greater so that more sections could be offered. To that end, the writer makes a single recommendation: that students who earn A's or B's in the first semester of the freshman English university-parallel course be allowed to enroll in a literature course concurrently with enrollment in the second semester of the university-parallel course. Nearly all community colleges require that students complete one year of English before they enroll in literature courses, all of which are considered to be sophomore-level courses. If a freshman has earned an A or a B in the university-parallel course's first semester, however, he is not likely to be a detriment to a sophomore literature class. He might also be able to take a literature course as an elective which tight scheduling could deny him in his sophomore year. Thus, students, teachers, and English departments all might benefit.

Teacher preparation: Some problems of teaching English are unique or are uniquely aggravated in the community college. For that reason, some special preparation should be required for prospective community college teachers. To that end, the writer makes the following four recommendations:

1. That the M.A. in English be the minimum requirement for teaching English in the community college. The writer would be hard-pressed to prove that a master of arts in English is a better degree for a community college English teacher than either the M.A. in education or the master of education degrees. The person is far more important than the degree. Nevertheless, prestige factors aside and other factors being equal, the additional depth in the field which an M.A. in English provides is important to a community college teacher, especially in certain areas he is not likely to have studied in depth during his undergraduate years.

2. That the prospective community college English teacher show a background in composition, linguistics, and at least one survey course in literature. University English majors often have no training in composition beyond their own freshman English courses, yet most of the English teaching load in a community college is in composition. A community college English teacher, therefore, should have advanced training in composition. He should be a proficient writer of expository prose himself, and should have had opportunity to observe and experience several ways of teaching writing. He should also have some training in modern linguistics. Although at present linguistic theories have only small application to the teaching of writing, further research and development will certainly reveal their application, especially to remedial English programs. Finally, the community college English teacher should have taken at least one survey course, preferably in American literature. Literature courses offered in community colleges tend to be introductory courses or surveys. Seldom does a community college English teacher have a chance to teach a literature specialty. Hence, his training should tend to be broader than that of his counterpart in a four-year college or university.

3. That a "teaching of English in the community college" course be offered on the master's level, and

that a unit on teaching English in the community college be included in the undergraduate English methods course. The teacher who enters community college teaching expecting it to be like teaching in a four-year institution is bound to be disappointed and frustrated. A course on the master's level which would prepare the prospective teacher for what he will probably encounter could be invaluable to him—and to his college. Also, since certification for community college teachers is not required in many states, such a "teaching of English" course might well be the only methods course the prospective teacher will take. Finally, since high schools are major sources of supply for new community college English teachers, and since undergraduates probably are not well acquainted with the problem of teaching English in the community college, a short explanatory unit should be included in the undergraduate methods course.

4. That better use of the Ed.D., educational specialist, and Ph.D. degrees be made. The community college English teacher usually has no educational goal toward which to strive other than the Ph.D. or Ed.D.; and "for at least half [the English teachers and chairmen], neither degree seems to be of major significance." [2] It seems that better use might be made of these degrees, the educational specialist degree, and perhaps the new certificates which a few universities are beginning to award when a student has completed all requirements for the Ph.D. except the dissertation.

Unless a community college English teacher really desires to develop a specialty, the traditional Ph.D. is probably a poor choice, since he would rarely have a chance to use his specialty in a community college. For the same reason, the new certificates are probably also poor choices. A Ph.D. in English and education, particularly if a student is able to do work in the community college as part of his education requirements, is a better choice. The Ed.D. degree, especially if course work can include urban sociology, might be a more worthwhile degree, even with the slight onus that *academia* seems to attach to it. Of all advanced degrees, however, the educational specialist degree probably offers the most promise. A "specialist in community college teaching" could be a worthy possibility for this degree. Combined with an M.A. in English, even the present specialist requirements provide relevant and worthwhile training for the community college English teacher.

General: Finally, there are three areas in which the writer wishes to make recommendations:

1. That community colleges actively pursue research on their own students and make the results available to their individual departments so that

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they in turn can do more competent research on their own programs. The writer was dismayed to discover that none of the colleges included in this study had done recent research on their student bodies (or if they had, the results had not been given to the English departments). English departments in particular need to know the characteristics of their students in order to plan an overall English program intelligently. If an English department can only surmise the needs of its students and does not know the end results of its efforts, it can only guess at the effectiveness of its program.

Intradepartmental research needs to be done, too. The writer found that there seldom was any basic agreement on why the content of an English course was good, nor any reliable data which would show that the course content was being taught well.

2. That there be more communication between English departments of two-year colleges and between English departments of two-year and four-year colleges. The writer found that there was little communication between the English departments of community colleges. Other than lack of opportunity, there appeared to be no reason for this; chairmen and teachers were eager to learn what the other colleges were doing. In many areas the colleges are striving toward approximately the same goals by traveling diverse roads. This is not to suggest that the English departments attempt to coordinate their programs; different student bodies may well require different English programs. But the writer cannot help but feel that more communication between English departments would be beneficial to all.

3. "That an English teacher in a two-year college should have no more than seventy-five students in composition and that he should have only three sections of composition, plus other teaching in literature, speech, drama, or whatever the nature of the school program dictates." Further, "that no English teacher should have more than two different preparations unless he prefers a wider variety of courses."[3]

These are recommendations from the National Council of Teachers of English. It should be obvious that a conscientious English teacher (the one with whom we should be most concerned) has a heavy load of paperwork, and that if English is to be taught well, that load must be reduced to reasonable proportions. The professionals in the field believe that the above recommendations represent a reasonable teaching load.

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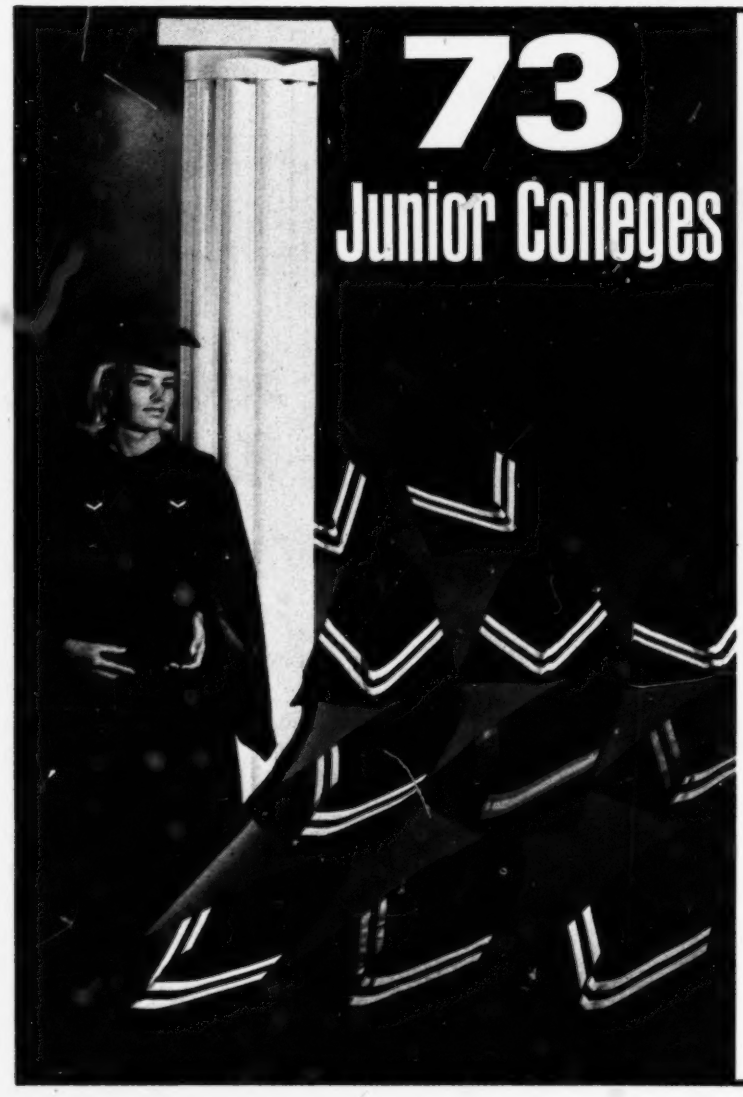
[1] Medsker, Leland L. *The Junior College: Progress and Prospect.* New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960. pp. 178-83.

[2] Weingarten, Samuel, and Kroeger, Frederick P. *English in the Two-Year College.* Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965. p. 62.

[3] Ibid.



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3 AAJC Approach ■ *Edmund J. Gleazer, Jr.*

7 The Question of Governance in Maryland ■ *Frank B. Pesci and Royal Hart*

10 How To Name a College, Sort Of ■ *Patrick Butler*

12 Junior Colleges and the New Careers Program ■ *Sheldon S. Steinberg and Eunice O. Shatz*

18 Open-Door College or Open-Door Curriculums? ■ *John E. Roueche and David M. Sims*

20 Open Door-Color TV ■ *Leslie Wilbur*

23 Community Colleges in Britain ■ *Louis Eisenhauer*

26 Miami-Dade's Weekend College ■ *Juliet Lewis*

28 If I Could Create Cinderella Junior College ■ *Richard D. Yeo*

32 Recommendations for Better English Instruction ■ *John Weber*

42 A Case for Student Involvement ■ *Eileen Hein*

46 Aviation at Metropolitan Junior College ■ *Don Krischak*

56 Current Guidelines for Income Tax Deductibility of Teacher Expenses ■ *Howard H. Serlin*

58 Literature in Passing

62 Letters

66 News Background

80 Credits

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